

Dr. William James Morton.

19 East 28th. Street.

MEMORANDA RELATING TO THE "DISCOVERY OF ANÆSTHESIA."

AMERICA has accorded but few public honors to medical students, to physicians, or to dentists. But when, in the due fulness of time and after mature consideration, a public honor, such as has recently fallen to the lot of the late Dr. W. T. G. Morton, "the discoverer of the safe use of ether," at last occurs, it would seem worthy of being noted in connection with the event which led up to it, by the medical press. We refer to the enrolment of Dr. Morton's name upon the base of the dome in the new chamber of the House of Representatives in the State House in Boston, among the selected fifty three of Massachusetts' most famous citizens. It will be noted in the quotation from the *Critic*, given below, that "the names have been selected in such a way that each shall either mark an epoch or designate a man who has turned the course of events."

The following accounts, from the *Boston Transcript* of November 10, 1894, and from the *Critic*, of New York, of November 17, 1894, give the main features of this event.

"Most Distinguished Citizens¹—The Fifty-three whose Names are Inscribed in the New House of Representatives.—The names of the fifty-three celebrated sons of Massachusetts have been selected by the State House Commissioners and are inscribed around the base of the dome of the new chamber of the House of Representatives. They are Morse, Morton, Bell, Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, Parkman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Copley, Hunt, Edwards, Channing, Brooks, Carver, Bradford, Endicott, Winthrop, Vane, Pickering, Knox, Lincoln, John Adams, Dane, Quincy, J. Q. Adams, Webster, Sumner, Wilson, Andrew, Choate, Parsons, Shaw, Story, Everett, Phillips, Garrison, Mann, Howe, Allen, Devens, Bartlett, Putnam, Franklin, Bowditch, Pierce, Agassiz, Bulfinch.

"A few of the names may not be quite familiar. Bell is, of course, the inventor of the telephone. He is the only man still living who has been included. Morton was the discoverer of anæsthesia. Knox and Lincoln were the Revolutionary major generals. Dane drafted the ordinance of 1787, and originated the clause in the constitution forbidding the impairment of the obligation of contracts. Quincy was the president of Harvard. Allen was an eminent judge. Howe was the tutor of Laura Bridgman and the revolutionizer of the methods of teaching the blind. Putnam settled the northwest territory."

Boston Letter.²—"The fifty three 'Immortals' of Massachusetts have been selected. In other words, upon the base of the dome in the chamber of the House of Representatives in the new State House will be inscribed the names of fifty-three sons of Massachusetts selected as representing the highest fame of the commonwealth. Some names, according to Senator Hoar, deserving to go in this list will have to be omitted for lack of room, but, as Lieutenant Governor Wolcott says, the list has been approved by the Governor and his council, and the names have been selected in such a way that each shall either mark an epoch or designate a man who has turned the course of events. Probably the selection, taken altogether, will be regarded as just. In that list stand Prescott, Motley and Parkman. There, too, are Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell and Whittier, while Carver, Bradford, Endicott, Winthrop, Vane, Pickering, Knox, Lincoln, John Adams, John Quincy Adams and Quincy are among the early patriots thus honored. Howe, the husband of Julia Ward Howe, the great worker for the blind, and tutor of Laura Bridgman; Morton, who discovered the safe use of ether, Copley, Hunt, Edwards, Channing, Brooks and Morse are also there, together with the great statesmen, Webster, Sumner, Wilson, Andrew, Choate, Everett, Phillips and Garrison. Among the later names are those

¹ From the *Boston Transcript*, Boston, Mass., Saturday, November 10, 1894.

² From *The Critic*, New York City, November 17, 1894.

of Devens, Bowditch, Pierce and Agassiz, while Bell, the inventor of the telephone, is the only man still living who is included in the list. These names will indicate the general drift of the selection."

And in this connection it is believed that the two accompanying letters from Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of them of recent date, and both published in the *New York Medical Record* of December 22, 1894, in the following communication will be of interest.

"ORIGIN OF THE TERM ANÆSTHETIC."

TO THE EDITOR OF THE MEDICAL RECORD.

SIR: I notice, in your issue of December 8th, an account of a conversation upon this point, between Mr. Edgar Willett and Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, when the latter was in England, in 1886.

It is quite possible that Dr. Holmes had forgotten that he had, in 1846, written to Dr. Morton a letter elaborately analyzing the varied appropriateness of several terms, and I take pleasure in sending to you from among my father's correspondence a copy of Dr. Holmes's original letter, exactly corroborative of the conversation above referred to. Dr. Holmes's letter reads as follows:

"BOSTON, November 21, 1846.

"MY DEAR SIR: Everybody wants to have a hand in a great discovery. All I will do is to give you a hint or two, as to names, or the name, to be applied to the state produced and the agent.

"The state should, I think, be called 'anæsthesia.' This signifies insensibility, more particularly (as used by Linnaeus and Cullen) to objects of touch. (See 'Good-Nosology,' p. 259.) The adjective will be 'anæsthetic.' Thus we might say the state of anæsthesia, or the anæsthetic state. The means employed would be properly called the anti-æsthetic agent. Perhaps it might be allowable to say anæsthetic agent, but this admits of question.

"The words antineuric, aneuric, neuro leptic, neurolepsia, neuro etasis, etc., seem too anatomical; whereas the change is a physiological one. I throw them out for consideration.

"I would have a name pretty soon, and consult some accomplished scholar, such as President Everett or Dr. Bigelow, Senior, before fixing upon the terms, which will be repeated by the tongues of every civilized race of mankind.

"You could mention these words which I suggest for their consideration; but there may be others more appropriate and agreeable.

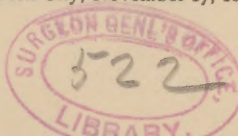
Yours respectfully,

"O. W. HOLMES.

"DR. MORTON."

When the child now known as anæsthesia had been born into the world by the public demonstration of a painless capital operation at the Massachusetts General Hospital, October 16, 1846, it had no name, and none could be immediately found for it, since the language of the day had not as yet been called upon to express the act or the state produced by the act. It was necessary to christen it. Accordingly, a meeting was held at the house of Dr. A. A. Gould, at which were present Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, Dr. O. W. Holmes, and Dr. Morton, and Dr. Gould read aloud a list of names which he had prepared. On hearing the word "Letheon," Dr. Morton exclaimed, "That is the name the discovery shall be christened." Dr. Gould and the others also favored this name, derived from the mythological river Lethe. But after a subsequent consultation with Dr. Holmes and a consideration of the terms suggested by him in the above letter, Dr. Morton adopted the terms anæsthesia, anæsthetics, and etherization, the terms now in common use.

While upon this subject it may interest your readers to read another letter of Dr. Holmes's, written forty-seven years later on—in fact, only a few months before his death—wherein no failure of his vigor or felicity of expression is wanting. This letter, now in the possession of the writer, has been published only in part, in the August number of the *Century Magazine* of the present



year, in an article entitled "Dr. Morton's Discovery of Anæsthesia." It reads as follows:

"BOSTON, April 2, 1893.

"MY DEAR SIR: Few persons have or had better reason than myself to assert the claim of Dr. Morton to the introduction of artificial anæsthesia into surgical practice. The discovery was formally introduced to the scientific world in a paper read before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences by Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, one of the first, if not the first, of American surgeons.

"On the evening before the reading of the paper containing the announcement of the discovery, Dr. Bigelow called at my office to recite this paper to me. He prefaced it with a few words which could never be forgotten.

"He told me that a great discovery had been made, and its genuineness demonstrated at the Massachusetts General Hospital, of which he was one of the surgeons. This was the production of insensibility to pain during surgical operations, by the inhalation of a certain vapor (the same afterward shown to be that of sulphuric ether). In a very short time, he said, this discovery will be all over Europe. He had taken a great interest in the alleged discovery, had been present at the first capital operation performed under its influence, and was from the first the adviser and supporter of Dr. W. T. G. Morton, who had induced the surgeons of the hospital to make trial of the means by which he proposed to work this new miracle. The discovery went all over the world like a conflagration.

"The only question was whether Morton got advice from Dr. Charles T. Jackson, the chemist, which entitled that gentleman to a share, greater or less, in the merit of the discovery.

"Later it was questioned whether he did not owe his first hint to Dr. Horace Wells, of Hartford, which need not be disputed. Both these gentlemen deserve 'honorable mention' in connection with the discovery, but I have never a moment hesitated in awarding the essential credit of the great achievement to Dr. Morton.

This priceless gift to humanity went forth from the operating theatre of the Massachusetts General Hospital and the man to whom the world owes it is Dr. William Thomas Green Morton.

"Experiments have been made with other substances besides sulphuric ether, for the production of anæsthesia. Among them, by far the most important, is chloroform, the use of which was introduced by Sir James Y. Simpson. For this and for the employment of anæsthetics in midwifery he should have all due credit, but his attempt to appropriate the glory of making the great and immortal discovery, as revealed in his contribution to the *Eighth* edition of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,' is unworthy of a man of his highly respectable position. In the *Ninth* edition of the same work his article 'Chloroform' is omitted and a fair enough account of the discovery is given under the title 'Anæsthesia.'

"Yours very truly, O. W. HOLMES."

"P. S.—You had better apply to Dr. Richard M. Hodges for his recent paper on the subject if you have not seen it already."

I am, yours very truly,

WILLIAM J. MORTON, M.D

NEW YORK CITY, December 15, 1894.

William Thomas Green Morton, M.D., medical student, dentist and physician, and the recent recipient of Massachusetts' honor, was born in Charlton, Mass., August 9, 1819, and died, aged forty eight, in New York City, July 15, 1868.¹

In 1840, at the age of twenty-one, he was a student in the "Baltimore College of Dental Surgery," a chartered organization connected with the Washington University of Medicine of Baltimore.

Subsequently he engaged in the practice of dentistry

¹ See the American Cyclopædia; New York, D. Appleton & Co., 1875. Article, "Morton, W. T. G.," p. 855. See Encyclopædia Britannica, Ninth Edition, Article, "Anæsthesia." See the Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, New York City, August, 1894.

in Boston, in the meantime assiduously pursuing his studies to receive a medical degree.

March 20, 1844, he entered his name as a student of medicine with Dr. Charles T. Jackson of Boston.

In November, 1844, he entered the Harvard Medical School in Boston in regular course as a matriculate and attended all the lectures.

In 1852 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine from his original *alma mater*, the Washington University of Medicine (afterwards merged into the College of Physicians and Surgeons), of Baltimore, Md.

On September 30, 1846, at his office in Boston, he administered sulphuric ether to Eben Frost and extracted a tooth without pain to the patient.

Securing permission from Dr. John C. Warren, Senior Surgeon of the Massachusetts General Hospital, on October 16, 1846, he administered ether to a patient at the hospital, and Dr. Warren performed a severe surgical operation, the patient remaining unconscious during the operation.

He was now twenty-seven years of age and still a medical student in the Harvard Medical School. The discovery now announced, brought with it overwhelming labors, and he was compelled to discontinue his studies from that moment onward.

From this crucial demonstration in October, 1846, dates the immediate and universal adoption of the practice of anæsthesia throughout the civilized world. The event marked the advent of a new epoch in the world's history, namely the epoch of practical painless surgery.

Over Dr. Morton's grave in Mount Auburn Cemetery, near Boston, a monument has been "erected by citizens of Boston" including names the most respected and most honored among them, bearing the following inscription, written by the late Dr. Jacob Bigelow, of Boston:

"WILLIAM T. G. MORTON,

INVENTOR AND REVEALER OF ANÆSTHETIC INHALATION.
BY WHOM PAIN IN SURGERY WAS AVERTED AND
ANNULLED.

BEFORE WHOM, IN ALL TIME, SURGERY WAS AGONY.
SINCE WHOM SCIENCE HAS CONTROL OF PAIN."

A monument in the Public Gardens in Boston is erected "To commemorate the *discovery* that the inhalation of ether causes insensibility to pain. First proved to the world at the Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, October, 1846," the date of Dr. Morton's successful demonstration at the hospital.

No other date is upon this monument except the date of its erection, 1867, and no other reference, except biblical quotations, to anæsthesia. It can therefore refer to no one but to Dr. Morton.

Dr. Morton received a divided Montyon prize from the French Academy of Sciences, the "Cross of the Order of Wasa, Sweden and Norway," the "Cross of the Order of St. Vladimir, Russia," and a silver box containing one thousand dollars from the trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital "in honor of the ether discovery of September 30, 1846." The trustees in their report, subsequently reaffirmed, unanimously according the honor and credit of the discovery to him.

He made several appeals for remuneration, for the use of his discovery in the army and navy, to the Congress of the United States, and although committees to whom the subject was referred made majority reports that he was entitled "to the merit of the discovery and to substantial reward," yet no reward was ever voted to him. At two sessions of Congress, bills in his favor were passed, and on one occasion the President of the United States held his pen in his hand to sign a bill and paused to consult Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War, with the result that the bill was never signed.

Announcing his discovery at the age of twenty seven and dying at the comparatively early age of forty-eight, his twenty one years of adult and active life were entirely consumed with the turmoil and pain of the controversy forced upon him by claims not one of which had ever appeared in print until *after* his initial announcement in 1846.

He died poor and

"He became poor in a cause which has made the world his debtor."

[New York, 1895]